New York
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1957

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1957 PRODUCTIONS

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Waltz of the Toreadors"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
January 18, 1957

THEATER

'The Waltz of the Toreadors'

By WALTER KERR

I THINK it was F. Scott Fitzgerald who once said that he had come to the time of life when it was always three o'clock in the morning. "The Waltz of the Toreadors," the new Jean Anouilh translation at the Coronet, is the kind of play where it is always three o'clock in the morning.

The odd thing about it is that this time of fatigue and despair and dread of another dawn turns out to be an endlessly fascinating and uproariously funny time.

This is partly due to the fact that General Ralph Richardson, with his mustachios bristling and his voice booming roundhouse commands, is currently leading the cavalry charge against the fate that bedevils romantic men. Mr. Richardson, looking like a cross between a lascivious goat and an exasperated Uncle Wiggily, is cast as an elderly satyr with the soul of a small boy. The boy still has dreams, rather ambitious sex dreams, as it happens. And he has hope, hope that one of these dreadful dawns everything in the world—beginning with women and ending with all felicity—is going to light up warmly, take him in its arms, and make him feel comfortable, satisfied, and thoroughly at home.

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Jean Anouilh is not, of course, the dramatist to give him his dreams. M. Anouilh has seen the worm in the apple, the light that fails in the eternal distance. He knows that no matter how fine a breast-stroke a man manages as he swims steadily toward the buoy in the middle of the ocean, he's not going to make it. The daydream, the childish promise of absurd joy, isn't true. A fellow's going to twitch, blink, damn his wife and ugly daughters, and throw up his hands in horror before it's over.

Richardson is just the man to seize every ornery nuance of this hopeless sex-duel in his sheepdog jaws and shake it for the fun, the fury and the pathetic howl of outrage that is in it. It doesn't much matter whether he's licking an envelope with the enthusiasm of a cat licking her young, telling boastful and disreputable stories about desirable little girls of twelve, roaring at the "misbegotten frumps" who are his children, or seething at his "great goop" of a soul—the grotesque balance of savagely ironic humor and wistful defeat is everlastingly, superbly sustained. This is the grotesque goat-man of Aristophanes, tempered with a bit of Shaw and a bit of Dagwood Bumstead, and it is—as a performance—magnificent.

But there is more to this curious, caustic, yet immensely entertaining evening than a single performance. Director Harold Clurman has found a way of conveying both the pessimism and the macabre merriment of Anouilh to American audiences. It may not be the only way, and it may not be the 'right' way; but it works. He has blown up the nagging fools and preposterous romantics of the piece into attractive Hogarthian monsters, equipped them with voices that seem to be calling trains, and set them to marching in circus-parade blare about the conventionally handsome Ben Edwards setting.

Every one is in on the secret. Mildred Natwick, as a wife who has faked invalidism to keep her husband in her grip, rises in her bed, clutches a sheet about her, hurls scathing epithets at the disappointed 'centaur' who married her—and brings down the house with each seething onslought. Meriel Forbes sniffs daintily at a pearl-handled revolver that may yet mean suicide—and the sniff is enchanting. John Abbott discusses the marvelous linguistic progress that medicine has made with sly urbanity. And John Stewart bemoans a young man's loneliness with a rigid 1910 decorum that perfectly suits the lithograph lines of the inventive staging.

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"The Waltz of Torreadors" is a mocking play that demands a taste for sweetened hemlock. It is sometimes blunt, sometimes bitter, sometimes cynical, and nearly always outrageous in its content and its method. But the rapier-thrust strikes oddly true: out of the calculated comic savagery comes an image of battling men and women that is, in its wild and wilful proportions, blisteringly accurate.

"THE WALTZ OF THE TOREADORS"

Comedy in three acts by Jean Anouilh, translated by Lucienne Hill; staged by Harold Clurman; designed by Ben Edwards; presented by the Producers' Theatre at the Coronet Theatre, January 17, 1957. The cast:

Mme. St. Pe.....Mildred Natwick
General St. Pe..Ralph Richardson
Gaston.....John Stewart
Sidonia....Mary Grace Canfield
Estelle.....Sudie Bond
Doctor Bonfant.....John Abbott
First Maid.....Frieda Altman
Mlle. de St.-Euverte.....
Meriel Forbes
Mme. Dupont-Fredaine.....
Louise Kirtland
Father Ambrose..William Hansen
New Maid.....Helen Seamon

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER
January 18, 1957

Richardson Superb in Delightful Sex Farce, 'Waltz of Toreadors'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"The Waltz of the Toreadors," which was presented last evening at the Coronet, is a superior piece of theatre in all departments—gracefully and wittily written, played most adroitly by Ralph Richardson, Mildred Natwick and company, and staged with style and quiet relish by Harold Clurman.

It is a sex farce by Jean Anouilh, and its English adapter, Lucienne Hill, appears to have missed none of its delightful undertones. Its manners are faultless but its implications are naughty as it looks into the frustrated life of a middle-aged French general (Richardson) who is hag-ridden by a bed-ridden wife (Miss Natwick).

Any close examination of the plot would be a disservice to the comedy and to the readers of this notice, for this is a play to be seen and heard and not read about. I should only say that it takes place in 1910 in the martially decorated home of a French general. The general has his wife, a fake invalid, and two monstrously unattractive daughters. He is engaged in dictating his dull memoirs to a young male secretary, but his mind is on memories rather than memoirs.

Girl of His Dreams

The general dwells upon an evening in 1893, when he was a lieutenant at the military college of Saumur, when he danced a waltz with a girl, fell in love with her and has loved her madly ever since—even though he hasn't seen her from then until now, when she suddenly turns up in his house.

Artful Scene

The slight complications of the plot are strictly farcical and traditionally French, and they would do just as well for a little comic opera. What makes "Waltz of the Toreadors" the delight which it becomes is the sardonic wisdom with which Annouilh and Miss Hill have embellished it. And there is no more artful performance in town than Richardson's playing of the general, who is so outwardly blustering and so inwardly insecure.

Moreover, there is no more artful scene-a-deux than the one in which the pitiable invalid, Miss Natwick, gives her quivering spouse all the complaints and all the accusations that any wife could ever yell and whine at a defenseless male. All by itself, this scene is worth the play—but there is, happily, much more than this to the play. The comedy is a delightful chapter in the unending history of the greatest of all wars, the war between the sexes.

There are many excellent performances—by John Abbott as a wise physician, John Stewart as the young secretary, Meriel Forbes as the girl of the general's dreams, Mary Grace Canfield and Sudie Bond as the daughters and Louise Kirtland as a visiting siren among them. Ben Edwards' setting is stylish and amusing, and quite a handsome period piece. And it is a playgoer's boon to have Richardson amongst us once again.

New York Post

January 18, 1957

By Richard Watts Jr.

Brilliant Comedy by Jean Anouilh

The stinging combination of cynical sex farce and romantic disillusionment that is Jean Anouilh's special province is at its most brilliant in "The Waltz of the Toreadors." With Ralph Richardson offering a distinguished performance in the leading role, an excellent cast in the supporting parts,

Harold Clurman's direction capturing an exuberant comic mood and Lucienne Hill's adaptation into English possessing a distinction of its own, the play seemed to me a stunning sardonic triumph in its first local performance at the Coronet Theater last night.

Let me say immediately that "The Waltz of the Toreadors" seems considerably more a richly entertaining comedy and less a disturbing mixture of savage laughter and rueful bitterness in its New York production than it did in London last summer. It is all a matter of emphasis. The text remains the same and the basic quality is still there. But my impression is that here it is staged more broadly and with more accent on the farce and that Mr. Richardson plays the central character with a humorous jauntiness that removes the touch of wistfulness the role had in the West End.

If the play thereupon appears less bitter and philosophically melancholy in the midst of its mocking laughter, it nevertheless remains a remarkable amalgamation of farce and disillusioned sadness. And there is no denying that it is far more continuously entertaining. Nor is this a betrayal of the Anouilh spirit, even though it does soften it considerably. For something of the basic bitterness is still present and "The Waltz of the Toreadors" is also a genuinely uproarious sex comedy, witty, ironic, sophisticated in a true sense of the word, and filled with bitingly incisive observation of the ridiculous sex maneuvers of presumably civilized mankind.

Essentially, the Anouilh comedy is a terribly candid but laughingly sympathetic portrait of a tired and aging amorist. Gen. St. Pe is a shabby and rather outrageous French officer, who loathes his ailing wife and his ugly daughters, has furtive little affairs with the servant girls, and is no doubt a fairly deplorable fellow. But, under his morally unprepossessing exterior, there is the soul of a wistful and incurable romantic fighting desperately to hold on to his remaining dreams.

"The Waltz of the Toreadors" is the story of his effort to retain the last of those dreams, and while it certainly doesn't get sentimental about it, there is genuine sympathy mixed with the mockery. It makes for a fascinating combination of moods. There is for example, a scene between the General and his vindictive wife that manages to be both hilarious and terrible. Even when the note of sadness is toned down the Anouilh play is more than just an intelligently funny comedy, but the fun and the intelligence are unfailingly present throughout.

Mr. Richardson's performance has the brilliant comic style of the true virtuoso, and there is a notable portrayal of the wife, at once humorous and unsparing, by Mildred Natwick. There are likewise fine characterizations by Meriel Forbes as the personification of the General's romantic ideal, John Abbott as his understanding doctor friend, and John Stewart as a guileless young man who learns rapidly. "The Waltz of the Toreadors" is comic entertainment of striking excellence. It is also a play with overtones of philosophical ruefulness that give it distinction.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 18, 1957

The Tempo Is a Bit Nervous

By TOM DONNELLY.

In France, they say, the playwrights have conditioned their audiences to accept in one offering the widest possible range of effects: Farce with tragic overtones, tragedy with farcial overtones, long passages of perverse philosphy climaxed by abrupt flurries of frenzied action, hilarious suicides, gloomy romances.

Jean Anouilh's "The Waltz of the Toreadors" (at the Coronet) is not as bizarre a mixture as some of the concoctions which have dazzled Paris, but it may prove a bit unsettling for American tastes.

The evening begins brilliantly by introducing a slightly motheaten general who is writing his memoirs and doing his best to ignore the screaming interruptions of his wife, a lady who has taken to her bed in a not very convincing impersonation of an invalid, and who delights in accusing her husband of allowing all manner of lascivious females to occupy his thoughts. The wife threatens to enter her husband's head and demolish these insubstantial rivals.

A Wistful Lecher.

In truth, the general is a wistful lecher, reduced to pinching and patting visiting seamstresses in the obvious places, and reminiscing over past lustful opportunities, many of them apparently never realized. A young woman who has occupied the general's illicit dreams for 17 years bursts upon the premises and demands that he take advantage of her at last. The general, a conscientious man in his way, hesitates, and the girl is lost to his young secretary.

Infuriated when his wife taunts him for, among other things, his delicate refusal to make his dream girl his mistress, the general has a go at strangling his legal partner. He does not succeed, but his wife does not take the attempt amiss, since she used to be an opera singer and she regards murder as the conventional accessory to passion.

"The Waltz of the Toreadors" ends as the general discovers that his secretary is actually his son by an old flame he can barely remember. Still tied to his shrill and venomous mate, the general consoles himself by going for a walk in the garden with the new parlormaid The moral, says a doctor friend of the general', is that "one must never understand one's enemy or one's wife."

Definitely a Comedy.

Now "The Waltz of the Toreadors" is definitely a comedy, at times a very amusing one, but it never gets into a satisfactory focus. There are two varieties of scene which are extremely effective. All of the relatively simple exchanges, in a vein of traditional wry of humor, are fine, and every now and then the principal figures engage in wild cartoon-like battles that are uproarious.

There are a number of other scenes that are tedious, or vague or merely strained, some of them suggesting the monotonous artificiality of operetta. The performance tends to waver. Sir Ralph Richardson has some superb moments as the general and it is, of course, always a pleasure to watch a gifted professional at work. Still, Sir Ralph's military man lacks the cutting edge of high comedy, which is presumably what is called for here. The actor comes close to, but never quite achieves, the dazzling unchallengeable force that carries all before it.

Mildred Natwick is bitterly funny as the wife, and the supporting artists are generally fair enough, with Mary Grace Canfield and Sudie Bond ideal in the rudimentary but convulsing roles of the general's two daughters, charitably described by their father as "a pair of misbegotten frumps."

I find it difficult to appraise the contribution of Meriel Forbes, who plays the general's ideal love, since, whenever she sets foot upon the stage, "The Waltz of the Toreadors" assumes what is for me its most annoying key. That is to say it takes on the air of a half-hearted burlesque of yesterday's melodrama's.

In his direction, Harold Clurman has not managed to unify these various pieces in a compelling design, but perhaps that is a task fit only for a Frenchman, working with actors to the Anouilh way of saying things.

The New York Times
January 18, 1957

Theatre: Anouilh Comedy

By BROOKS ATKINSON

FOR a desolate man, Jean Anouilh knows how to write a remarkably gay comedy. For a classical actor, Ralph Richardson knows better than most how to act with the gusto of a low comedian.

They have happily come together in "The Waltz of the Toreadors," which opened at the Coronet last evening, and ought to bring audiences happily together for a long time. Since M. Anouilh apparently believes in nothing, he is free to play fast and loose, not only with intellectual ideas, but also with the categories of drama.

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And "The Waltz of the Toreadors" is a gallimaufry of stage entertainments—a French farce that lampoons itself by making a sensible remark now and then and that ends on a brisk note of despair. Mr. Richardson comes into the picture just about here. In his last visit to New York he was a member of the Old Vic troupe that played several of the classics. Without losing the style of a classical actor, he is now clowning exuberantly through the part of a humbug French general, giving size, depth and relish to an impish play, and making a funny skit very funny indeed.

•

In the first scene of the comedy, General St. Pé, formidably mustachioed, is resonantly dictating his glorious memoirs to an insipid male secretary. On a sickbed in the adjoining room, lies the general's invalid, querulous wife, suspecting him of committing infidelities in his mind even as she is dying.

Although this is not a comic situation it becomes one when it appears that her invalidism is a fake, that the general loathes her, that she is hanging on to him for the sake of comfort and security, and that for seventeen years he has been imagining himself hopelessly in love with a silly spinster.

•

In its guise as a French farce, "The Waltz of the Toreadors" goes through the familiar amorous motions. It concludes with a hackneyed scene in which the insipid male secretary, heretofore an orphan, is identified as the general's son by a half-forgotten illicit assignation. But the farce is on two levels. For M. Anouilh (in Lucienne Hill's vivacious English version) keeps shifting gears from farce to cynicism or from farce to common sense, which is equally amusing. In the midst of comic extravagances, M. Anouilh suddenly brings the audience face to face with a homely fact. It is at once startling and funny.

•

One of the most useful things about a good farce is that it is pre-eminently an acting piece. Under the droll and silken direction of Harold Clurman, this one is acted to the hilt. Ben Edwards has provided an amiably fantastic set in which everything is a little too big, ornate and massive.

And the performance is in a similar key. Mr. Richardson's changes of pace are fabulous. In the midst of a military roar and posture, he suddenly drops his voice to a conversational level, and the laughter out front is probably all out of proportion to what is said. He gives a heroic performance that is just short of heroic conclusions. The disparity is as witty—wittier, perhaps—than the dialogue.

•

All through the evening, the performance is delightfully broad. Mildred Natwick's invalid wife is a torrent of vulgarities and grotesque theatrical attitudes. John Abbott's comradely physician is wonderfully bland. Meriel Forbes' rebellious spinster is a bridling, empty-headed fraud. John Stewart's male secretary is improbably innocent and bumptious.

At the core of "The Waltz of the Toreadors" lies the black despair of M. Anouilh's basic attitude. Understanding is the real source of unhappiness, he says at the end, and doubtless he means it. But the surface of the farce is original, bright, tart and worldly, and the acting is exuberantly comic. Between them, M. Anouilh and Mr. Richardson have brought us a remarkably civilized caper.

Journal American
January 18, 1957

Sir Ralph Pulls Out All Stops In Sexy Farce

By JOHN McCLAIN

SIR RALPH RICHARDSON, who has been seen hereabouts in Shakespeare and in many a stern magic lantern charade, last night appeared on the stage of the Coronet Theatre with an elaborate mustachio, goatee and heavy eyebrows in "The Waltz of the Toreadors," by Jean Anouilh. This considerable character displayed a mannered and delightful appreciation of farce, a roguish delivery of the author's many hilarious lines that should make the show a happy hit.

The plight of a fading faun is always good grist for humor, and the author has ground it down to the last kernel. In this one Sir Ralph is a general (pardon the analogy), a yet robust warrior who is writing his memoirs in the odd moments when he is not busy with his mistress, his hypochrondriac wife, two ugly daughters and occasional chambermaids.

The plot ebbs and flows around his faltering ability to pursue his lechery, and his prideful outrage as he sees his long-standing paramour falling into the arms of his pip-squeak secretary. There are other convenient resolutions that come late in the evening which keep the sense of general nonsense alive.

Plays Role to Limit

This strikes me as the sort of farce the season needed. From the opening gong there is no pretense or reality or reason; Richardson plays the role up to the limits of his grotesque makeup, and he does it with authority and great style. He postures and rants, he cajoles and cavorts, and he is constantly beguiling.

In this endeavor Mr. Anouilh has given him strong material and Howard Clurman's direction is always sure and sympathetic. The scene in which he puts a chair on a table and teeters there, unable to dislodge a pair of dueling swords so that he can fight his youthful rival, will be long remembered. The staging of the entire proceedings are in bright agreement with Ben Edwards' interpretation of a French country house, the complementary colors of costumes and the unobtrusive lighting.

The cast surrounding the star is uniformly superior. Mildred Natwick is a consistently droll and acidulous bedridden wife, and the invective with which she belays her spouse is delightful to the ear. John Stewart is properly callow and self-effacing as the secretary, and Meriel Forbes is a decorative and disingenuous mistress.

John Abbott gives a pleasantly philosophical delineation of the family doctor, and other solid contributions are offered by Mary Grace Canfield and Sudie Bond, as the excessively unattractive daughters, and by Frieda Altman, Louise Kirtland, William Hansen and Helen Seamon.

"Waltz of the Toreadors" opens up a mad new career for Ralph Richardson, and it brings to the Broadway stage something long lacking — a tastefully insane comedy.

Daily Mirror
January 18, 1957

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Waltz of Toreadors' Is Hilarious Comedy

• This Gallic frolic is sure to draw long box-office lines at Coronet.

Jean Anouilh's "The Waltz of the Toreadors" danced gaily into the Coronet Theatre on Thursday evening, and immediately warmed up a first-night audience that had been chilled by the elements en route to the showshop. We suspect that it will be the most successful of the French dramatist's works to be done in America.

It is a cynical and sophisticated farce that Anouilh has penned. It is typically Gallic in its sorties into marriage, sex, philosophy and life. It is as complicated in plot as Schnitzler's "Reigen" and as robustiously obvious as Thornton Wilder's "The Matchmaker." Lucienne Hill has fashioned a graceful English version.

GENERAL ST. PE is a lusty and lecherous old goat, married to a temperamental, hypochondrial ex-opera singer, yet still in love with a youthful belle he had met while stepping to "The Waltz of the Toreadors" at a military ball. He is also the father of a couple of teen-age daughters who wouldn't have to don masquerade costumes to impersonate harpies.

The aging satyr finally determines to revive a 17-year-old romance, which has been dormant due to a sense of responsibility toward his possessive and hysterical wife, only to have an illegitimate son pop up and win away his adored. Papa also suffers the humiliation of learning that his petulant spouse has been indulging in some extra-marital fandangos of her own.

Is the centaur of Saumur downcast by his misfortunes? Yes, for a little while. Until his roving eye falls on the buxom figure of a new housemaid. C'est la vie. He's off to the races again, looking for another winner in the romantic sweepstakes.

Ralph Richardson plays the General with relish and telling effect. He catches the surface bravado and the inner loneliness of the peripatetic military man with persuasive skill. Mildred Natwick, as his nagging ball-and-chain with a flair for the melodramatic, has a triumphant scene with Sir Ralph in the second stanza. Here, dear readers, is acting off the top shelf.

JOHN STEWART, as a young secretary who proves to be the General's son; John Abbott, as a wise family physician; and Meriel Forbes, as the beauty who sacrifices pere for fils, also make delightful, tongue-in-cheek contributions to the sardonic saraband.

Harold Clurman has staged the satiric whirl into French domesticity, circa 1910, with the inventiveness and vitality of a Tyrone Guthrie. Yet, the direction is genuine Clurman, with revealing nuances and subtleties that are his own. And Ben Edwards has provided atmospheric period sets and costumes.

Most of the plays that come to us from France, via England, fail to win New York's favor. Here, however, is a fanciful frolic that, after drawing long lines to the box-office in Paris and London, promises to do likewise over here.

"The Waltz of the Toreadors" is stylized and special, brittle, witty and sparkling. Beneath its rambunctious exterior, it carries a goodly cargo of bitter wisdom. It's immensely funny, with a dash of heartbreak here and there. In sum, a hilarious comedy with a worldly viewpoint. A welcome hit, we think.

"A Clearing in the Woods"

New York Post
January 11, 1957

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Lady and Her Three Other Selves

Arthur Laurents, a dramatist of versatility and ambition, turns to psychoanalytical fantasy in his latest play, "A Clearing in the Woods," which opened last night at the Belasco Theater. He has hit on an imaginative conception and written it with intelligence, and it is excellently acted by Kim Stanley and a good cast. Possibly it will appeal more to women than it does to a male reviewer, but my impression is that, despite the thoughtfulness of its probing into a neurotic girl's subconscious mind, it resulted in a labored and curiously unstimulating drama.

The disturbed heroine of Mr. Laurents' examination is a young woman with a really split personality. In fact, it is split into four embattled parts, only one of which is Miss Stanley. She portrays the mixed-up lady at the time of the writing. Three other actresses represent her past. The first visualizes the way she was as a child, the second is her adolescent self, and the third lets you see how she was at the period of her unhappy marriage. A great deal of the play is concerned with scenes in which the girls indulge in quite a lot of squabbling.

All of this actually isn't nearly as complicated as it may appear in my attempt at explaining it. Indeed, although there were advance reports that "A Clearing in the Woods" was going to be very difficult to understand, I'll take the liberty of saying that it is easy enough to follow. The heroine at first doesn't recognize the three girls whom she encounters at her old home in the forest, but I can't believe an audience will face equal problems in the matter. All that is disturbing is that the results of the lady's meeting with her other selves aren't very dramatic.

It appears that she was running away from a crisis in the city, where she had discovered that the young man she loved didn't live up to her ambitions for him, and she fled back to the old homestead. There she met those ghosts of the past, as well as her drunken father, a couple of youths she had known, and a kind of symbolic seducer named George. It also appears that one of the troubles she faced was the fear that the men she had slept with didn't respect her. When she finds that they really do, things look much brighter to her.

If I have seemed to take the play's narrative with heavy facetiousness, I'm afraid I've been a little unfair to it. One of its virtues is that Mr. Laurents treats his subject matter with respect and never lets it get out of hand. But, while he makes it all plausible enough, he rarely makes it dramatically impressive. Nor, despite the excellence of Miss Stanley's performance, does he manage to make the heroine either very interesting or very touching amid all her emotional disturbances. The manner of the drama is considerably more striking than its substance.

While Miss Stanley is continuing to demonstrate what a fine and sensitive actress she is, there are also admirable portrayals by Joan Lorring, Anne Pearson and Barbara Myers as the other manifestations of the split heroine.

"A CLEARING IN THE WOODS"

Play in two acts by Arthur Laurents; staged by Joseph Anthony; scenery by Oliver Smith; costumes by Lucinda Ballard; lighting by A. H. Feder; presented by Roger L. Stevens and Mr. Smith at the Belasco Theatre, January 10, 1957. The cast:

Virginia	Kim Stanley
Nora	Anne Pearson
Jigee	Barbara Myers
Barney	Onslow Stevens
Ginna	Joan Loring
George	Pernell Roberts
Pete	Robert Culp
Hazelmae	Sybil White
The Boy	Tom Hatcher
Andy	Lin McCarthy

Onslow Stevens as the father, Pernell Roberts as the incidental roue, Robert Culp as the young ex-husband, and Lin McCarthy as the current sweetheart are likewise particularly helpful. And Joseph Anthony has directed with lucidity. I can't believe "A Clearing in the Woods" is an enigmatic play, but it isn't a properly effective one, either.

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

January 11, 1957

'Clearing in the Woods' Fraught With Freud or Something Else

By JOHN CHAPMAN

There must have been some reason for the production of "A Clearing in the Woods" at the Belasco Theatre last evening. If there weren't, Arthur Laurents wouldn't have written it, Roger L. Stevens and Oliver Smith wouldn't have produced it and Kim Stanley would not have acted in it. The only illogical thing about the whole affair is that I went to it and couldn't make any sense out of it, no matter how hard I tried.

I can only guess that this is a fantasy with psychoanalytical overtones. There must be hidden meanings in it somewhere—and no doubt some of them are dirty. But, because I grew up as a fairly ordinary police reporter and neglected my studies of psychopathia, I am unable to submit a lucid report on last night's goings-on. About all I can safely say of them is that they were fraught.

Must Be Deep

I do have some notes of snatches of conversation, but they contribute little toward an intelligent play criticism. For example, somebody says to Miss Stanley, who keeps tossing her head as if her scalp itched, "Virginia, I am sure that all you need is a good night's sleep." When somebody else asks her, "Have you been dubious of your sanity" and she says "Yes," she is advised to relax.

Somewhere during the evening somebody says, "I am conversing with an old enemy — me." And somebody else says, "Don't you know that loving is knowing someone and still loving?"

This stuff must be pretty deep. At any rate, all the staff at the Belasco think it is. Miss Stanley, Joan Lorring, Onslow Stevens, Pernell Roberts and the other actors treat it with great respect. Co-producer Smith has designed a fantastical and doubtless symbolic clearing in the woods, and Joseph Anthony has directed the performance with the absolute certainty that playwright Laurents must have written something.

But did he?

Journal-American
NEW YORK

January 11, 1957

Kim Stanley Excels But the Play's Oblique

By JOHN McCLAIN

A TEARY and tormented Kim Stanley stood near the center of the Belasco Theatre stage at the conclusion of "A Clearing in the Woods" last night and said, "An end to dreams isn't an end to hope."

This struck me as a really courageous statement, after all she'd been through. It also impressed me as one of the few clear enunciations in an evening of pretentious and consistently oblique play structure from the pen of Arthur Laurents. Why must a simple and searing play be told with such indirection?

A lady executive, reaching the end of her emotional rope, returns to her family home and a clearing in the woods, where the events leading to her present desperation are revisited. There is the little girl who cut up her father's ties, the teenager who was amiably seduced, the bride who failed to bring meaning to a marriage and, finally, the mature and mixed-up Miss Stanley.

Eerie Chant

To vitalize this the author has used three players ranging in age from a simulated six years, to 17, to the early 20s; these are all really the same person and when they combine with the heroine to fill the stage with episodes from her life it is somewhat confusing.

Even when they are not visible their voices may be heard in an eerie off-stage chant saying, "He won't, and you know it!", or, "It's no good...it's no good." Later in the proceedings they group around her, like harpies, plunging the knife into her conscience and turning it slowly.

All this, of course, gives the gifted Miss Stanley a field day before the footlights. But it seems to me that it would have been much more rewarding if her troubles had been explained in less symbolic terms. A woman approaching middle age has made a nothingness of her life, but must her desperation be relayed in this labored manner? There is one juncture at which the mere detour around a tree represents a five-year flash-back. It didn't strike me that either the conception or the execution was worth it.

Haunting Set

As a vehicle for Miss Stanley's fragile yet unfaltering talents this is an interesting evening. There are all the moments of desperation, seductiveness and sly comedy at which she excels; there are not enough of them, unhappily, to make the final product rewarding.

With her, also doomed by the same deficiency, are Onslow Stevens, who is exceptionally ingratiating as her father; Joan Lorring, Barbara Myers and Anne Pearson, as the earlier facsimiles of herself; Pernell Roberts, Lin McCarthy, Robert Culp and Tom Hatcher as interludes in her past.

Joseph Anthony has directed with distinction, Oliver Smith's set is weird and haunting, Lucinda Ballard has achieved an arresting array of costumes, especially for Miss Stanley, who is able to make deft alterations onstage.

But this is an arduous evening, and all the hopes will not make the dream come true.

The New York Times

January 11, 1957

Theatre: Heroic Attempt

By BROOKS ATKINSON

HAVING succeeded with the possible in "The Time of the Cuckoo," Arthur Laurents has now tried the impossible. He has tried to illustrate the analysis of a neurotic woman in "A Clearing in the Woods," which was acted at the Belasco last evening.

In this column's opinion, Mr. Laurents has not succeeded. But first let us recognize the areas in which he has succeeded. Succeeded, that is, with the assistance of a superb production and performance. For Mr. Laurents' associates are as articulate as he is.

Oliver Smith has set the stage with a necromantic forest and a spectral summer-house; and A. H. Feder has poured on a pulsing light that eloquently illuminates the varying moods of the story.

Under the imaginative direction of Joseph Anthony, who likes to step off the beaten track, Kim Stanley gives a splendid performance—personally beautiful, plastic in its flow of images, emotionally alive and searching.

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She is Virginia, the afflicted woman, who cannot make peace with life, and is tormented with memories of the past. She is trying to find a clearing in the woods; she is trying to find peace in the midst of anguish. The play consists of her attempts to run down her past and find the place where the pain began.

In the persons of other actors (all of whom resemble Miss Stanley in some respect), Mr. Laurents shows Virginia at various stages in her career, beginning with childhood, and including the several men in her life, beginning with her father. They are phantoms from the past. Until the final scene of release, they weave in and out of her mind in various phases of conflict, failure and misunderstanding.

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Although the process of "A Clearing in the Woods" is increasingly engrossing as the play moves along, Virginia is not an interesting woman. She is an egotist—a sick egotist, unless that is a redundant phrase; and she has nothing except her sickness to offer the audience. To her the involutions of her thoughts and memories are no doubt fascinating. But they do not engage the sympathies of the audience. She is an abstraction. When she finds a way to make peace with herself, she is naturally elated. But the elation is private. Never having had the chance to know much about her social character, the audience cannot share her radiant feeling of release.

That is the reason "A Clearing in the Woods" always seems remote and detached, like a series of figures pinned on a screen. Poetry is a better medium than psychoanalysis for the job Mr. Laurents is trying to accomplish.

But let's not underestimate the technical dexterity of the performance and the production. The beating and whirling musical score by Laurence Rosenthal is full of expression. In every part the acting is soft and entrancing—Anne Pearson, Barbara Myers and Joan Lorring as earlier stages in Virginia's life; Onslow Stevens as the drunken, regretful father; Pernell Roberts, Lin McCarthy, Robert Culp and Tom Hatcher as the various men; Sybil White as an adolescent friend and conspirator.

And, of course, Miss Stanley, evoking hopes and fears out of the haunted air of the forest; she gives a rich and luminous performance. Granted that Mr. Laurents and his associates have tried the impossible, they have made a notable attempt.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 11, 1957

I Found a Light In the Clearing

By TOM DONNELLY.

In "A Clearing in the Woods" (at the Belasco) Arthur Laurents is dealing in a very complex and original way with some shop-worn materials. The end product does not tug at the heart strings, or at any rate not at MY heart strings, but the play is steadily interesting, it has been expertly acted, directed, and mounted, and it's certainly one of the livelier events of a dim season.

Mr. Laurents has written a psychoanalytic drama, without including a psychiatrist or a couch among the props. Something tells me I'm going to have a difficult time conveying a coherent impression of the evening, but I'll do my best.

Insofar as the setting goes, the title of Mr. Laurents' work is to be taken literally. The curtain rises on a clearing in a woods made up of gauzy, skeletal trees. Designer Oliver Smith has done his job so effectively that we can see at a glance that here is an area of memory, the ideal place for a heroine to encounter all the figures from her past. Enter the heroine, Virginia, a girl troubled in the extreme.

Three Virginias.

Sure enough, Virginia encounters her father, her ex-husband, her old beaus, and, what's more, three earlier versions of herself. There is the child Virginia, called "Jigee"; the adolescent Virginia, who called herself "Nora" because she so admired the heroine of Ibsen's "A Doll's House"; and the Virginia who called herself "Ginna" and made a considerable mess of a youthful marriage.

Mr. Laurents makes no attempt to erect easy guideposts for the spectator. The adult Virginia acts out all the pain and frustration of her later years, and her three alter egos have individual scenes of their own. The assorted Virginias combine and recombine, and at times the three alter egos pursue the lady we may designate for the sake of convenience as the essential Virginia. "I've been driven mad by three white miseries!" the essential Virginia cries. Some of the cash customers may very well echo this sentiment, but I must say I admire Mr. Laurents for boldly putting this four-part study of a woman on the stage without apology, preamble, or footnote.

Considered as a piece of theatrical machinery, "A Clearing in the Woods" is by turns fascinating, amusing, occasionally rather annoying, but by and large highly stimulating.

Familiar Case History.

But if Mr. Laurents' play is almost always entertaining, it is almost never emotionally compelling. Perhaps because of the very nature of its structure, "A Clearing in the Woods" does not emerge as a recognizable portrait of a human being. Virginia is not much more than a familiar case history, a kind of graph of the "lost modern woman."

For all its tricky surface treatment, and its employment of elements of fantasy, whenever "A Clearing in the Woods" tries to explain what makes Virginia tick it suggests a dramatization of one of those popular magazine articles wherein psychologist presides as the referee of a battle between Mary and John. Mary: "John has no ambition and he loses his temper if I try to inspire him to get ahead." John: "Mary is cold to me and she is a sloppy housekeeper." Psychologist: "Mary hates herself because she felt unwanted as a child."

In only one scene, really, Mr. Laurents allows himself to compose a passage of old-fashioned person-to-person conflict, the upshot of it being Virginia's terrified admission that she believes herself incapable of love. It is the best scene in the show.

Despite the clinical limitations of her role, Kim Stanley gives a brilliant performance as Virginia. It is far and away the best thing she has done. She is ably assisted by Joan Lorring, Anne Pearson and Barbara Myers as her other selves, and by Onslow Stevens, Pernell Roberts, Robert Culp and Tom Hatcher as the men in her tangled life. Joseph Anthony's direction is, as already indicated, excellent.

Daily Mirror

January 11, 1957

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Clearing In Woods' Is a Bore at Belasco

• Psychiatric weekend is not likely to be productive of dividends.

The news from the Belasco Theatre this morning is that Arthur Laurents is still a promising playwright. But not nearly so promising, in our book, as he was when he turned out "Home of the Brave" and "Time of the Cuckoo." For his latest opus, "A Clearing in the Woods," represents retrogression.

Apparently Laurents has mistaken pretentiousness for depth, obfuscation for the poetic. He is concerned with a neurotic girl who returns to the wreckage of her childhood home, meets herself at different ages and seeks a philosophy that will permit her to live. She's not very bright, and perhaps should have been in the hands of a psychoanalyst.

* * *

ANYWAY, Virginia, while a tot, cut up her pop's pants to command attention. Later, she had an affair with a husky woodchopper. Then she married and divorced a big wheel on a college campus, and almost wrecked his life. Next she demanded too much of a scientist suitor, and had him headed for the rocks. And as for her dad, she helped drive him to drink.

You see, Virginia was seeking perfection, not realizing that there's no such thing. When she didn't find it in herself and those about her, she blew her top and came close to suicide. But in the end, she learned to accept hope in place of impossible dreams.

Joseph Anthony has staged the fantasy with semi-balletic movement, against a filmy forest glade by Oliver Smith. At one point in the proceedings, Nora, Jigee and Ginna — Virginia's younger selves—made like witches out of "Macbeth," cackling in turn, "I am Virginia!" And a neighbor in the audience observed out loud, "I am bored!"

* * *

ROGER L. STEVENS and Oliver Smith have spent a sizable fortune to give "A Clearing in the Woods" the best of everything. We suspect their investment will not be productive of dividends. However, it will provide an endurance test for the hardy bent on seeing how much they can take under fire, and survive.

Kim Stanley wrestles valiantly with the mental midget, Virginia. She works like the proverbial Trojan to make this willful, self-centered, mixed-up femme appealing. But we don't think even Duse or Bernhardt could have turned that trick. After all, magic has its limitations.

Onslow Stevens, Joan Lorring, Pernell Roberts, Anne Pearson, Robert Culp, Lin McCarthy, Sybil White, Barbara Myers and Tom Hatcher were other unfortunates trapped in the frantic fiasco. Stevens was probably wishing he were back in Hollywood, and Roberts yearning for a role like Petruchio in Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew."

* * *

NOW, we didn't clock the running time of "A Clearing in the Woods," but it can't be a too lengthy work. It just seems that way. It's like a weekend in the woods with a bunch of perplexed people annoying the devil out of you with a lot of high-falutin' talk about their troubles, which aren't particularly important to you.

When it comes to psychiatric cases, we'll take "Lady in the Dark" or "Oh, Men! Oh, Women!" For it was fun to watch their subjects confess all to the big domes from couches enveloped in hilarity.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

January 11, 1957

THEATER

A Clearing in the Woods

By WALTER KERR

IN THE psychological fantasy at the Belasco, Kim Stanley has no fewer than three alter egos: herself at the age when she was apt to cut up daddy's favorite ties, herself at the age when she liked to sneak a cigarette and lace her pineapple juice with an experimental dash of gin, herself at the age when a husband could make certain reasonable demands.

There comes a time in the evening when Miss Stanley stands, panic-stricken, in a spotlight at center stage, raises a fist filled with sleeping-pills to her twisted mouth, and is asked—by the three "white nightmares" waiting breathlessly around her—just how much of an overdose will be needed to kill them all.

The question, however, is not what it will take to kill them, but what it will take to bring them alive.

Theatrical pulmotors are working feverishly all night on the problem—sometimes with near-success. Director Joseph Anthony, for instance, has seen to it that all the woodland noises, the bursts of eerie music, the darting behind trees and stream-of-consciousness dances are managed with split-second timing and a decent grace. Designer Oliver Smith's transparent birches—with a trapped kite lodged high among them—successfully suggest a place "in mid-air, too low for planes and too high for people." Lucinda Ballard's gauzy costumes float blissfully by.

Author Arthur Laurents has had, here and there, an insight that makes you sit up and take notice: a child begging for a spanking just to be sure that some attention is paid to her, a cold father providing a youngster who has threatened to run away with the sandwiches and suitcase that will make running away perfectly possible.

* * *

And Miss Stanley's determination that this unhappy career-girl's problems shall seem ferociously plausible is awe-inspiring. With little lines of tiredness under her eyes and an encroaching hysteria nagging at the corners of her mouth, she makes a wonderfully convincing set-piece of the business of being unable to turn the knob of her office door, or the further business of dropping first a sheet of paper, then a cup, then an ash-tray out of the window she is thinking of diving through. The variety is endless and often fascinating: childlike snarls, sudden hoots, stammerings that are almost—but not quite—under control add restless shadings to lines that are sometimes no more than monosyllables. Joan Lorring, Robert Culp, Pernell Roberts, Onslow Stevens, and Lin McCarthy stay with her every gasp of the way.

* * *

But even when we are interested, we are glacially unmoved. Indeed, precisely as this Virginia who has loathed herself learns gradually to like herself, we tend to reverse gears and become impatient with the monumental self-pity that has brought so much soul-scratching into being.

There may be two or three reasons for this. Four Virginias are not really more interesting than one Virginia: the evening—and our emotional response—splinters into abstract fragments. Mr. Laurents has additionally indulged himself in the "Hello morning, hello sunlight, hello me" school of rhetorical wool-gathering ("All you need is a good night's sleep," "But does sleep need me—what happens to the night when I'm not in it?"), and he was surely ill-advised to use the phrase "sick, sick" in seriously describing his heroine.

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But if one thing damages the project more than another it is probably the fact that, once we have fought our way through so much intricacy to a few final truths, the truths we come upon are trivial. This is, after all, the indifferent father, the jittery career-girl, the frigid bride and the medicine-chest full of sleeping-pills given one more whirl about the stage. The machinery is seriously in excess of the meaning.

"Small War on Murray Hill"

The New York Times

January 4, 1957

Theatre: Spicy History

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALL but one of Robert Sherwood's admirable qualities can be found in the posthumous "Small War on Murray Hill," which opened at the Ethel Barrymore last evening.

This little anecdote from the American Revolution contains his devotion to this country—his patriotism, his thoughtfulness, his skepticism about human motivation, his belief in an ultimate destiny that cannot be understood. The quality that is missing is his humor—the drollery and geniality of his earliest plays.

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In a program note, John Wharton points out that Sherwood's chief concern in this comedy was "the problem of driving home the fact that the motivations of most men and women, in both peace and war, are extremely complicated, and quite different from the reasons given after the event by these same people." Why did Lord Howe, commander of the British forces, fritter away his military advantage after the battle of Brooklyn Heights by philandering with Mrs. Mary Murray on her husband's Manhattan farm? What were her reasons for entertaining him?

"Small War on Murray Hill" chronicles this amusing episode that probably had a decisive effect on the conduct of the Revolution. Beginning with an expository scene in Brooklyn, where the tactics of the impending battle are defined, the comedy moves to the Murray farm, where the courtliness, the dissembling, the hesitation, the recklessness and the disillusion are portrayed.

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Portrayed, moreover, in those human terms that ran off Sherwood's pen. For the people on both sides are winning. Lord Howe's distaste for his mission to fight in America and Mrs. Murray's enigmatic industry as a hostess are described with the Sherwood good nature. The blustering, officious, humorless eagerness of the Hessian commander makes a contrast that is also illuminating.

But, alas, the Sherwood humor is missing from a play that Mr. Wharton describes as a "light comedy." Although the author's mind is in it, the heart is not as gay as it was in the years when he was in high spirits. The good nature never quite reaches the combustion point of humor. What Sherwood left us is a thoughtful, carefully written historical drama with insight into the minds of the characters, but with little energy and little of the familiar drollery of a great human spirit.

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His colleagues in the Playwrights Company have given it a beautiful production and a beguiling performance; and Garson Kanin, one of Sherwood's close friends, has directed it with affectionate attention to tone and details. Out of the American past Boris Aronson has designed a handsome drawing room with glimpses of the hills, rivers and fields of Manhattan in the eighteenth century.

The acting is illuminating as well as enjoyable. Leo Genn's relaxed, patient, ruminative Lord Howe with his gentlemanly manners explains the point of the play. And so does Jan Sterling's dainty, mettlesome Mary Murray with her mysteries and mental alertness.

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The cast is a long one, and it is without exception winning and intelligent, and everyone looks particularly splendid in the ravishing costumes Irene Sharaff has designed. Even in the headquarters scene, a certain elegance has been achieved.

"Small War On Murray Hill" is an enlightening inquiry into the true nature of a spicy bit of American history, worthy of a fine, patriotic mind. But the spirit is tired. There are some rueful overtones of autobiography in this sketch about the biography of America.

"SMALL WAR ON MURRAY HILL"

Comedy in two acts by Robert E. Sherwood; staged by Garson Kanin; settings by Boris Aronson; costumes by Irene Sharaff; presented by the Playwrights Company at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, January 3, 1957. The cast:

Lt. Lord Frederick Beckenham.....Daniel Massey
Major Clove.....Nicholas Joy
Sam Pieters.....Harry Sheppard
Gen. Sir William Howe..Leo Genn
Hessian.....Michael Lewis
Gen. Graf von Donop.....Stefan Schnabel
Robert Murray...Joseph Holland
Mary Murray.....Jan Sterling
Capt. DuPont....Nicholas Probst
Daisy.....Jonelle Allen
Susan Lindley..Patricia Bosworth
Amelie.....Vinnette Carroll
Samuel Judah...Francis Compton
Mrs. Torpen.....Sally Walker
Abigail Torpen.....Susan Oliver

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

January 4, 1957

'Small War on Murray Hill' Fine, Smart Comedy, Smoothly Acted

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Another dead man has joined Shakespeare, Shaw and O'Neill in pumping life into our faltering play season. He is Robert E. Sherwood, whose "Small War on Murray Hill" was presented at the Barrymore by the Playwrights' Company last evening. It is a most delightful comedy, played by a most delightful company.

Sherwood wrote and rewrote "Small War" before he died in November, 1955, and for several months now director Garson Kanin has been preparing the production. This work has shown results, for the comedy has style and polish—and so does a large and picturesque company of players, including Leo Genn, Jan Sterling, Daniel Massey and Francis Compton.

Sherwood let his frequently impish imagination toy with an item in the history books—the one in which Mrs. Robert Murray beguiles British General Sir William Howe into tarrying in her home instead of pushing on with his redcoats and his Hessians and driving a wedge between the armies of General Israel Putnam and George Washington. Thanks to this lady's enticements, Putnam was able to join Washington on the Harlem River under cover of night.

Complete Campaign

According to Sherwood, Mrs. Murray's delaying tactics include a cocktail made of Holland gin and sherry called a stone wall, an excellent lunch prepared by a Creole cook, some intelligent conversation, a dinner featuring steamed clams, plenty of good brandy and, one suspects, finally her own beautiful self. Since her merchant husband was on the British side for profit's sake, he could not have declared, "I regret that I have but one wife to give for my country."

The comedy is written and played on a high level of polite badinage. Even when he realized that he has been outwitted by a woman, General Howe does not lose his courteous aplomb; and on her part, the woman never lets a glint of triumph show in her eyes.

The action, if it can be called that, takes place in the lavish Murray home on a Manhattan hilltop which was then known as Inclenburg. (It was Sherwood's notion that it was Mrs. and not Mr. Murray which gave the Boris Aronson has devised a beautiful house and the woods and New Jersey Palisades beyond. Round about the house sentries march, children both white and colored scamper and servants go about their chores... while within Miss Sterling goes on with her ladylike seduction of Genn.

Splendid Cast

These two are splendid opponents, for she is ravishingly beautiful in her Irene Sharaff gowns, and every handsome inch of him bespeaks the suave English gentleman.

There are many other excellent and entertaining performances, down in size to Jonelle Allen, who plays a little Negro girl. Massey, son of Raymond, makes a pleasing Amercan debut as a boyish, girl-crazy lieutenant on Howe's staff. And the girl he pursues, Patricia Bosworth, is worth the hunt.

The only ones who make any noise in "Small War on Murray Hill" are Stefan Schnabel as a German mercenary general and his aid, Michael Lewis. Schnabel is very funny as he keeps insisting that they should get on with the war and go after Putnam. Nicholas Joy is amusing as a bewildered American major, and Joseph Holland is properly unctuous in the role of Murray. And Francis Compton is superb as a crafty, sardonic American banker. It may have been a small war on Murray Hill, but it is a big thing on Broadway.

New York Post

January 4, 1957

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Final Play of Robert Sherwood

Robert E. Sherwood's final play, "Small War on Murray Hill," is a graceful and likable little romantic costume comedy. It certainly isn't a dramatic work of any size or pretentions, and it frankly concedes this undeniable fact by the adjective in its title. This is bound to be a matter of some disappointment to admirers of the distinguished American dramatist and citizen. But, as attractively acted by an excellent cast in its first performance at the Ethel Barrymore Theater last night, it possesses an engaging charm that is immensely disarming.

It is of rather curious interest that Mr. Sherwood closed his career as a playwright on the same topic with which he began it. He was wondering why a successful military leader didn't go on to win the victory that seemed within his grasp, and, in both cases, his answer was sex. In his first play, "The Road to Rome," he was concerned with Hannibal's failure to follow up his defeat of the Romans by taking their capital. In "Small War on Murray Hill," he is preoccupied with Gen. Howe's fatal delay in Manhattan after he had vanquished George Washington's demoralized troops.

One could hardly say that in either comedy he supplied an answer to a mystery which would satisfy historians, but I should imagine his solution to Howe's enigmatic refusal to take advantage of the temporary demoralization of the revolutionary Continentals came closer to the facts. It is possible that the British officer did stay in New York, instead of pressing his military success, because he was smitten by the charms of young Mrs. Murray, and that his heart wasn't in the war against the rebellious colonies. Anyway, it makes a pleasant sentimental fable.

But hardly a sturdy one, or one that made for a highly eventful dramatic entertainment. Nor did he make any effort to go in for the kind of Shavian wit that he essayed in "The Road to Rome," even though his Gen. Howe bears a certain kinship to Shaw's Gen. Burgoyne. There are assuredly no dramatic surprises or suspense in "Small War on Murray Hill." You have no doubt from the start that the amorous soldier is going to spend the night with the patriotic Mrs. Murray, and Mr. Sherwood obviously didn't intend that you should. He was preoccupied with other things.

All that he was concerned with was providing a pleasant romantic entertainment replete with historical background, and I think he managed it attractively. If there is no particular sharpness of wit or satire in the play that was tragically to be his last work for the theater to which he contributed so importantly, there is humor, charm and appealing warmth, and it is written with a grace of style and urbanity of manner that are unfailingly engaging. His final comedy has a mellowness and serenity that provide a comforting quality of quiet freshness.

It has been given a fine production, and Garson Kanin has staged it with the mellowness that goes with the writing. Jan Sterling is attractive and delightful as the patriotic hostess, and Leo Genn is humorous, deft and charming as the likable and easygoing Gen. Howe. There is a fresh and skillful portrayal of a romantic young British officer by Daniel Massey, and Nicholas Joy, Francis Compton, Stefan Schnabel and Patricia Bosworth are of vast help in smaller roles. Boris Aronson's setting is also of great assistance. Mr. Sherwood's last play is small but appealing.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 4, 1957

Minor Skirmish In Old Manhattan

By TOM DONNELLY.

It would be intensely gratifying to be able to hail the late Robert E. Sherwood's "Small War on Murray Hill" (at the Ethel Barrymore) as the witty final testament of one of America's more celebrated playwrights.

But almost all that can be said for this comedy is that it has a prevailing tone that is soothingly genteel. Mr. Sherwood has built his text on a legendary footnote of the American Revolution: Mrs. Robert Murray entertained the British commander, Gen. William Howe, so beguilingly that he forgot there was a war on, and allowed Putnam and Washington to escape what looked like certain defeat.

Lacking in Size.

Mr. Sherwood's last work for the theater is curiously lacking in size, point and definition. In a program note, John Wharton, an intimate friend of the author's, remarks that "most war leaders have doubts, fears, desires and aims, conscious and unconscious, which jumble themselves together and often bring forth actions clearly inconsistent with rational decision. Until this occasional irrationality is widely understood, we shall never be able to deal responsibly with the problem of war." Mr. Wharton asserts that "it was Sherwood's desire to write a play which would make this widely understood."

If Mr. Wharton has stated Mr. Sherwood's intention correctly, two things must be said. First, it would be a truly extraordinary play that could realize any such subtle ambition, and, second, even with the best will in the world it is impossible to see "Small War on Murray Hill" as anything but a routine costume piece.

It Isn't Funny.

To put it harshly, Mr. Sherwood's comedy is not funny, it is lacking in dramatic incident, and the two central characters are dim indeed. Mrs. Murray here emerges as a hostess as devoid of fascination as one of those ladies who greet the customers in the kind of restaurant where the blue plate special is likely to consist of creamed chicken on toast with a marshmallow sundae for dessert.

She murmurs, "Don't you think that the cardinal sin is indiscretion?" and that is as clever as she gets.

Now and again she asks something on the order of, "Is there any hope for Gen. Washington and the Continental Armies?" But she does not seem to be deeply involved in anything, certainly not in the Revolution, and her attitude toward Gen. Howe is so bland that there is no way of telling whether her decision to spend the night with him is on a more pulsating plane than her decision to offer him another drink before dinner.

Easy To Be Bland About.

At that, Gen. Howe is an easy man to be bland about. He tends to admire the foolish gallantry of the hard-pressed colonials, and to express himself on this subject with condescension that is too gentle to be either offensive or stimulating. His amorous response to Mrs. Murray is lethargic in the extreme. Here we have two people who are so placed that they cannot indulge in any flashy ideological arguments: Mrs. Murray must pretend to be a Tory sympathizer, and, in any case, Gen. Howe does not appear to feel strongly on the issues which might divide them, or to have any flair for the biting phrase.

Leo Genn and Jan Sterling are attractive performers, but they do not exert themselves as the general and his temporary lady. A more vigorous approach to their roles might have helped. Daniel Massey, as a young British staff officer smitten with the charms of a colonial maiden, gives the lustiest, and most successful, performance of the evening. Stefan Schnabel, Patricia Bosworth and Nicholas Joy are OK in secondary parts.

Boris Aronson's 1776 parlor and Irene Scharaff's costumes are as crisply handsome as a bolt of the very best chintz. "Thankless" is probably the word to pin on director Garson Kanin's assignment.

Daily Mirror
January 4, 1957

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

Sherwood Drama Bows at Barrymore

• 'Small War on Murray Hill' a lethargic work.

The late Robert E. Sherwood launched a brilliant career as dramatist with a comedy called "The Road to Rome." It had to do with a beautiful Roman matron, who charmed Hannibal into sparing her city. Shortly before his death, Sherwood penned a companion piece, "Small War on Murray Hill."

In this amiable but small play, the lovely Mrs. Robert Murray charmed General Sir William Howe into sparing General Israel Putnam's army, so that it might escape a trap and join the forces of Commander-in-Chief George Washington North of New York. The gallant Howe also re-named a Manhattan hill after his patriotic hostess.

SHERWOOD IMPLIED that the fair Amytis and Mary were not averse to entertaining such personable and interesting warriors as Hannibal and Howe. And he suggested that Howe was quite aware of the possible results of his tarrying in the Murray mansion, for he was sympathetic to the colonists and a kindly man.

As he aided Putnam's troops, so had he done with a tired and cornered fox on a hunt in England. Sir, later Lord, William was a civilized fellow, if not the greatest of generals. He was probably the most popular of the top-echelon Redcoats with the embattled American revolutionaries.

"Small War on Murray Hill" lacks the satiric bite, the wit of "The Road to Rome." Its laughs are far fewer, for its lines are less sparkling and sexy. About the best it can do, for all its good intentions, is to garner a chuckle here and there. This, despite the fact that the Playwrights' Company has given it the advantages of an excellent cast.

Jan Sterling is captivating as the Mary Murray whose hospitality and generosity helped to change the course of history. Leo Genn is enormously likeable as the suave Howe. Daniel Massey is ingratiating as a not-overly-bright, but ever so romantic, aide to the British general.

* * *

PATRICIA BOSWORTH, as Mrs. Murray's sister, is also a most attractive eye tonic. And there are worthy contributions by Nicholas Joy, Stefan Schnabel, Joseph Holland, Francis Compton and Jonelle Allen. Little Miss Allen is a juvenile edition of Butterfly McQueen.

Garson Kanin, one of our truly gifted directors, has done his best by the Sherwood comedy. And Boris Aronson has designed settings that give an idea of picturesque New York when Murray Hill was but a lush farm, topped by a tasteful manor house.

If you would like to know Sherwood's version of how a determined woman gave a breathing spell to her countrymen's weary forces, then a visit to the Ethel Barrymore Theatre might be in order. But may we warn that you won't find top-shelf Sherwood.

Though what really happened **was vastly important to the cause of the Colonies, "Small War on Murray Hill" makes it seem a minor though pleasant affair. The doings at the Barrymore are graciously lethargic. A bit disappointing, too.**

New York Herald Tribune
January 4, 1957

THEATER

'Small War on Murray Hill'

By WALTER F. KERR

IN "Small War on Murray Hill," a thoroughly relaxed General Howe—who should be out chasing Putnam before he can join forces with General Washington—sits sipping his wine like the connoisseur he is, admiring from across the room the exceeding loveliness of a lady who is bent on trapping him for the night, and reminiscing. "I myself," he murmurs," have messed about a little in politics, in order to find out how the other half lives."

The late Robert E. Sherwood, whose last completed play this is, also paused in his lively theatrical ocupations to mess about in politics during a war. The messing, as it turned out, proved extraordinarily useful messing—producing some of the finest rhetoric heard during World War II and a final monument in the exhaustive and genuinely brilliant "Roosevelt and Hopkins." The experience did show Mr. Sherwood how the other half—the non-theatrical half of this troubled universe—lives. And, I think, it changed him.

He never quite came back to the brisk, colorful, ironic, bumptious, sometimes savage and sometimes funny world of the practical theater: the theater that is a satisfying end in itself. He turned dutifully sober in "The Rugged Path," hesitatingly gay in the musical "Miss Liberty." But the whip that could once be swung freely and with a shout of laughter was permanently hung on the wall; the satirist had turned quietly reflective.

The final quiet reflections, cast once more in the surface form of comedy, are measured out gently and evenly in the play at the Barrymore. Leo Genn, as that William Howe who is going to let an army slip through his fingers, cannot quite conceive of himself as a vigorous militarist. He is interested in the "civilized sustenance" of his nightly Madeira. He is sure that the Americans he is pursuing are "fuzzy-minded idealists, who believe in things," but he is also willing to give them a sporting chance—to let Destiny take a small hand in these affairs. He is further fascinated by the regal, gracious and challenging Jan Sterling, his hostess of the moment—not simply because she is a woman but because she possesses intelligence, guile, and candor.

Whatever is genuinely appealing about this essay on the folly of war and the necessity of fighting it comes precisely when these two controlled contenders look directly into one another's eyes, smile, and speak honestly. Miss Sterling does not conceal from her enemy the fact that she means to delay him, by fair means or fairer. Mr. Genn does not hide the fact that he knows exactly what she is up to. Between their bemused glances and carefully clear speech an odd integrity rustles forward; Mr. Sherwood is not teasing his audience with bedroom farce, he is letting it in on the game and asking it to study the rules. Perhaps a thought or two will emerge from the reservedly romantic conversation.

But in spite of the civilized playing, the endlessly decorative staging of Garson Kanin, the extraordinarily handsome Revolutionary War farmhouse that designer Boris Aronson has opened to view, the change in Mr. Sherwood is a change away from theatrical excitement. He is not now writing 'scenes' that catch fire; he is serving balanced thought in balanced sentences, and the effect is ultimately drowsy. He is no longer concerned with the relieving crackle of wit; a mild chuckle or two must serve as canapes before the chaste light supper. The result is a comedy that is thoughtful, generous, and literate—but not comic. And since its casual materials are nowhere sturdy enough to bear the burdens of a serious play, "Small War on Murray Hill" falls into that unhappy no-man's-land between.

In the course of what must surely be a perfect production, Daniel Massey—of the acting Masseys who are doing so well this season—gives a winning performance as a callow young Redcoat, Francis Compton moves with sly sobriety from patriotic commerce to patriotic arson, Stefan Schnabel clicks his heels heartily as a warlike Hessian, and a pretty ingenue named Patricia Bosworth brightens the surroundings no end.

Journal-American
January 4, 1957

Sherwood's Final Work Is Just Too Talky

By JOHN McCLAIN

REGRETFULLY from here comes the word that "Small War on Murray Hill," Robert Sherwood's last play, is disappointing. There are all sorts of things to be said in favor of this Playwrights' Company production which opened at the Ethel Barrymore theatre last night, but not enough to make it a rewarding experience.

Nothing was spared in its mounting, the cast is voluminous and generally excellent, and there are many moments when the fine Sherwood wit and sagacity light up the premises. Then it resolves itself into discoursive considerations which leave the theme of the play and are not, in themselves, compelling enough to keep interest alive.

Mr. Sherwood chose an interlude in American history, at least partly apocryphal, as his genesis. British Gen. Howe, in Brooklyn, is planning to move his forces to Manhattan and prevent Gen. Putnam, whose American Army is bogged down near the Battery from joining forces with Gen. Washington in the Bronx.

Having successfully made the crossing of the East River he pauses at the home of Mrs. Murray, wife of a rich Royalist, who seduces him into tarrying until the union of the two American armies is effected.

Delves Into War

There is more to it than that, of course. There is the exploration of war and its mixed motives—the German mercenary general who fights on any side, hoping only to win; the British general for whom war is a cricket game, to be played cleanly and well, though the reason why may be muddled; the American merchant who feels he serves his interests best by losing the War and keeping the States a Crown Colony; his counterpart, a banker who is dedicated to the future of the new world as a brilliant experiment in freedom and liberty.

It seemed to me that while Sherwood stayed with his original story line he was on sure ground. The historical elements in the play are presented with humor and authenticity. His professional British and German warriors are people who breathe and are equally revolted by their discomfort in line of duty. Even the Americans, the wife who detains the British general, her sister who unwillingly falls in love with the general's aide, are dimensional characters.

But when the figures of symbolism take over, I thought the play stood still. There is an insufferable amount of talk, some of it very good indeed, but it is smothered by much that is not.

Lacks High Drama

Jan Sterling, who plays the lady who lent her name to Murray Hill, is always decorative and captivating, although she was never given a scene of dramatic stature. In fact even Leo Genn, who is truly authoritative and beguiling as Gen. Howe, never seems to come to grips with a highly emotional moment.

It is the fault of neither; the situation in the play comes off as a casual flirtation, as quickly resolved as it started.

In the large cast mention should be made of Daniel Massey, Nicholas Joy, Francis Compton, Stefan Schnabel, Patricia Bosworth, Joseph Holland, Vinette Carroll and a sprout named Jonelle Allen.

Boris Aronson's two sets are tastefully conceived and highly attractive and Garson Kanin has given the whole effort thoughtful and ingenious direction.

This is a negative review that one hoped desperately he would not have to write.

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